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Security Council

Seventy-second year

Provisional

7909th meeting
Thursday, 30 March 2017, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Rycroft	(United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Fernández Revollo
	China	Mr. Zhang Dianbin
	Egypt	Mr. Aboulatta
	Ethiopia	Mr. Alemu
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Italy	Mr. Cardi
	Japan	Mr. Bessho
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Sadykov
	Russian Federation	Mr. Safronkov
	Senegal	Mr. Ciss
	Sweden	Mr. Skoog
	Ukraine	Mr. Yelchenko
	United States of America	Ms. Sison
	Uruguay	Mr. Rosselli

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016) (S/2017/244)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016) (S/2017/244)

The President: In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Stephen O'Brien, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2017/244, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016).

I now give the floor to Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: The Syrian conflict has entered its seventh year, and we have all borne witness to one of the largest man-made humanitarian and protection crises in the world. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed and millions more injured. Almost 5 million people have fled and are now living as refugees. Crimes against humanity and war crimes have been committed by all parties time and again, as the Commission of Inquiry attested to earlier this month. In Syria, there is not a man, woman or child from any walk of life who has not felt the impact of the particular wretchedness of this especially gruesome and protracted conflict. Syrians have watched huge parts of their historic and proud country reduced to rubble. The building blocks of civilian life, including bakeries, water stations, hospitals, schools, and places of worship, have been gradually destroyed.

The parties gathering in Geneva this week — and those around this table today — surely understand the huge responsibility on their shoulders to bring this Syrian nightmare to an end after years of political intransigence. I cannot emphasize enough how high the stakes are. The Syrian people need to see a tangible improvement in their daily lives because, quite frankly, it is they who have borne the brunt of this conflict. It is my hope, and the hope of every humanitarian, to see the current political process succeed, and we are fully behind the Secretary-General, his Special Envoy, Mr. De Mistura, and his team.

While we rightly acknowledge the current efforts being made on the political track, we have to maintain a laser focus on the fact that violence continues to rear its ugly head in various parts of the country, even if images of it have largely disappeared from the world's television screens since the evacuation of eastern Aleppo. Indeed, the last months have been some of the worst yet for civilians inside Syria and, for Syria, that is saying something. The continued use of explosive weapons and ongoing military operations in populated towns and villages in Hama, Damascus, Idlib, Aleppo, Dar'a, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor governorates have killed and injured hundreds of civilians over the past weeks and displaced tens of thousands more. Attacks on civilian infrastructure such as medical facilities and schools — a trademark of the war in Syria — continue to be reported.

I remain deeply anxious for the safety and protection of over 400,000 civilians due to ongoing military operations in Raqqa governorate. We continue to receive reports that fighting and air strikes continue to result in death and injury for scores of civilians and damage to civilian infrastructure, including schools, bakeries, markets and water infrastructure. For example, on 21 March, air strikes reportedly hit the Al-Badiya school in Al-Mansoura town in western rural Raqqa governorate, resulting in scores of deaths and injuries among the internally displaced people who were living at the school. On 22 March, air strikes reportedly hit a bakery and a local market in the Al-Tabqa area of Raqqa, resulting in dozens of civilian deaths and injuries. And on 27 March, an engineer and technicians, including a Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) volunteer, were reportedly killed as a result of an aerial attack while they were at the Tabqa Dam to assess the dam prior to conducting repairs and stabilizing it. Meanwhile, tens of thousands have reportedly been displaced as a result of the offensive since November 2016, and humanitarian partners have been responding to the displaced.

As the fighting moves to more civilian-populated areas closer to Raqqa city, concerns about the fate of civilians will only grow. I urge all parties to do everything in their power to protect and spare civilians

from the effects of the hostilities, as required, not just requested, under international humanitarian law. The United Nations and partners stand ready to scale up assistance through whichever modality is most appropriate and have prepositioned stocks of relief items in several locations to enable a rapid response in Raqqa, access permitting. But that is the key phrase: "access permitting".

Elsewhere, fighting in the northern countryside of Hama governorate over the past week has had significant safety and protection concerns for civilians. The closure of key roads in Hama has restricted commercial and civilian movement. A hospital in Latmana town was reportedly attacked from the air, resulting in the death of a doctor and a patient. Up to 40,000 people have reportedly fled the affected areas of fighting in northern rural Hama to locations in Hama, Idlib, Homs, Tartous and Lattakia where the United Nations and partners are responding. Some of those internally displaced persons are at risk of further displacement as fierce fighting continues and front lines continue to shift.

In the capital, Damascus, the death and injury of dozens of people by two explosions targeting Bab al-Saghir, where many pilgrims were visiting in mid-March, was an appalling reminder of the willingness of extremist terrorist groups to wantonly target civilians. Similar explosions targeted a court house and a restaurant. The past fortnight has also seen non-State armed groups increase their shelling on populated areas of Damascus, including Bab Touma, Rukn Al-Din and Abbasin Square, killing and injuring many civilians over the past two weeks and leading to the temporary closure of schools in some neighbourhoods.

The hundreds of thousands of civilians trapped in besieged areas continue to face severe and horrific threats at every turn. I remain extremely concerned about the deteriorating security and humanitarian situation in the besieged parts of eastern Ghouta in rural Damascus, where some 400,000 people are trapped by Government forces. Over the past month, we have continued to receive reports of civilian casualties and injuries due to heavy aerial bombardment and artillery shelling of the besieged enclave and adjacent areas of Barzeh, Qaboun and West Harasta. Some 27,000 people have been displaced due to the fighting, including some 17,000 people further into eastern Ghouta and 10,000 people to At-Tall in rural Damascus. More people are likely to flee in the coming days if fighting continues.

According to the World Health Organization, all three public hospitals and seventeen public health-care centres in eastern Ghouta are non-functioning and inaccessible to the population, with several of them reportedly destroyed by airstrikes, although some facilities are reportedly still operational elsewhere. The number of children suffering from trauma injuries is alarmingly high; 30 per cent of all patients with war-related injuries are children under 15 years of age. It bears repeating that 30 per cent of all patients with war-related injuries are children under 15 years of age. The deaths of patients due to lack of dialysis equipment and a measles outbreak have also been reported. Since 20 March, Government forces reportedly have prevented commercial trucks from entering eastern Ghouta, resulting in elevated price hikes for basic staples, while informal trade has also been curtailed.

Put starkly, this tightening of the siege has started a time bomb for the people of eastern Ghouta. It is critical that the United Nations and our partners be facilitated access to the enclave before conditions deteriorate further. The last United Nations humanitarian delivery to any of the besieged areas of eastern Ghouta was in October 2016, nearly six months ago, with other areas not accessed since June 2016. Recent approvals to reach the area could not be acted upon due to the security situation and lack of facilitation letters, although the SARC was able to deliver a portion of the health supplies planned for the convoy on 9 March — including 250 dialysis kits, vaccines and baby milk — to its sub-branch in Duma. This partial delivery was welcome, of course, but clearly wholly insufficient given the scale and gravity of circumstances people are facing.

I have also been following the situation in the besieged neighbourhood of Al-Wa'er, in Homs, with great concern, a community of tens of thousands of people that I visited cross-line in 2015. From November last year until this month, sporadic fighting, limited access to commercial supplies and a growing scarcity of basic supplies have resulted in an insufferable situation for trapped civilians. There has been no United Nations inter-agency humanitarian delivery to the besieged neighbourhood since 26 October 2016, and as I reported last month, a convoy planned for 20 February was forced to turn back due to insecurity and, in the process, trucks were diverted, aid was taken — although some was later retrieved — and drivers were abused.

It is our understanding that a local agreement was signed between the Government of Syria and non-State armed groups in Al-Wa'er earlier this month. As part of that agreement, some 3,500 people — including fighters, their families and civilians — were evacuated on 18 and 27 March from the besieged neighbourhood of Al-Wa'er in Homns towards Jarablus in rural Aleppo. It is our understanding that further evacuations are to take place on a weekly basis until the process has been finalized. Also as part of the agreement, Government forces reopened one of the roads connecting Al-Wa'er neighbourhood with the rest of Homs city and food items are now entering the neighbourhood without hindrance, prices have fallen and electricity has also been restored.

The United Nations has also received reports of an agreement between parties to the conflict to evacuate people from the besieged towns of Madaya and Zabadani in rural Damascus and Fo'ah and Kefraya in Idlib, otherwise known as the Four towns. The agreement reportedly includes the entry of humanitarian assistance and a nine-month pause in fighting covering the Four towns and southern parts of Damascus and its countryside. We are monitoring developments closely as the level of humanitarian and protection needs of those in each of the besieged Four towns remains of the highest severity.

Let me be clear. The United Nations was not involved in any of the negotiations for these agreements or the evacuation process for Al-Wa'er, but I must underscore our concern over such agreements. As we have seen elsewhere, evacuations from besieged areas typically follow months or even years of unrelenting military siege and offensive military action; of severe restrictions on freedom of movement for civilians, as well as on commercial and humanitarian goods; and of unremitting, appalling humanitarian conditions.

All sieges are stark, contemptuous violations of the Council's resolutions. All sieges must be lifted immediately — full stop. However, as I have made clear before, this should not be through any type of surrender agreement that results in the decimation of an area and the forced displacement of some parts of the civilian population. Any evacuation of civilians must be safe, must be voluntary, and must be to a place of their choosing. It is imperative that all those who are displaced through such agreements be allowed to return voluntarily, in safety and in dignity, to their homes as soon as the situation allows. Parties must allow humanitarian organizations safe and unimpeded access to bring life-saving help to those displaced and those who wish to remain, and identify and respond to protection threats.

Let me now turn now to access. I had sincerely hoped that 2017 would bring about a step change in our level of humanitarian access, particularly to besieged and hard-to-reach areas, building on the relative progress of last year, particularly the first nine months. The bottom line is, however, that with a quarter of the year gone, our current levels of access are no better than they were at this time last year. Through the March inter-agency convoy plan, we had sought to reach 787,500 people through road convoys. However, original approvals were received for only 44 per cent, or 348,200 people — the lowest approval rate since March 2016, when the monthly plan process began, although this increased to some 74 per cent later this month when additional approvals for some other locations were received following intense engagement by the United Nations team on the ground

As we sit here today, with the month virtually complete, we have reached some 200,000 people against the plan. This includes convoys for some 133,500 people in the hard-to-reach areas of Bludan and Wadi Barada in rural Damascus and Talbiseh in Homs. This is limited incremental progress, thanks to extraordinary efforts of the team on the ground. The only besieged areas reached through our convoy plan were the Four towns and Khan El-Shih in rural Damascus, which was completed today. In addition, vastly expensive and technically challenging airdrops to Deir ez-Zor continue for nearly 93,500 people given no land access at all to these people besieged by so-called Islamic State. Even then, various medical items on the convoy completed today were removed, and when we reached Madaya, one of the four towns, we were unable to distribute all of the delivered assistance owing to sniping from surrounding militias that itself left several people dead.

After painstaking negotiations by our humanitarian coordinator and the team from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs on the ground, another convoy is planned to deploy today to the hard-to-reach area of Rastan in Homs, reaching more than 110,000 people altogether, meaning a total of some 310,000 against the plan if the convoy successfully deploys. With several deliveries over the past week, the pace of convoys is picking up. and I salute the round-

the-clock efforts of my humanitarian colleagues in the United Nations, SARC, the International Committee of the Red Cross and our other humanitarian partners in Damascus who bravely make that possible. However, it is still the case that for every convoy that reaches its intended destination, several more are unable to deploy during the month as a result of the Government of Syria's recurring administrative issues and delays. At the same time, some non-State armed groups continue to threaten or refuse to cooperate with humanitarian workers. And sustained United Nations access to areas under the control of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, such as parts of the Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor governorates, remains extremely limited.

While the number of convoys this month represents some progress compared to previous months, it is essential that the Government agree to take further steps to simplify the bureaucratic processes around the preparation and deployment of inter-agency convoys. The current bureaucratic architecture is at best excessive and at its worst is deliberately intended to prevent convoys from proceeding. The United Nations continues to engage the Syrian authorities in good faith to find a way to improve the inter-agency convoy process. As part of that, the United Nations team has submitted a two-month inter-agency convoy plan for April and May with the aim of reaching 1 million beneficiaries in 28 besieged and hard-to-reach locations. It is hoped that spreading the plan over a period of two months rather than one will provide enough space for the approvals to be translated into deliveries on the ground. Aside from genuine security problems, there should be no compelling reason for the convoys to be unable to proceed over that two-month period.

We will do our part to make that happen, but we hope that the Syrian authorities will also do theirs and take the necessary steps. That means removing the requirement for multiple facilitation letters to be received for health, agricultural or water, sanitation and hygiene supplies, and signing facilitation letters within two days of receiving a request from the United Nations. It means allowing delivery on the basis of United Nations needs assessments and allowing requested surgical and medical items to be loaded. Those are all simple steps that, taken immediately, will have a definite positive impact on the lives of suffering civilians in so many parts of Syria.

At the same time, for continued progress to happen, we also need the renewed support of Council members and the members of the Humanitarian Task Force of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in doing their part, which is exerting their individual and collective influence on the parties. The breakthroughs last year and even the progress this week, however incremental, are proof that when there is enough political will, when we work together in the name of humanity, it is really possible to reach people in desperate need of lifesaving assistance. But if we are honest with ourselves and add up the score sheet today, the ISSG has not actually secured any access to the besieged or hard-to-reach areas, either for us — the humanitarian personnel — or the United Nations more broadly. When we have reached them, that has always been as a result of the brave, persistent and patient negotiations by the teams on the ground and by utilizing one or two influential channels.

These years of fighting and continued access challenges have meant that millions of Syrians have been forced to live in appalling conditions, often without safety or the basic essentials of life. Some 13.5 million Syrian people will try to go to sleep tonight in dire need of assistance. The scale and severity of humanitarian needs show no sign of dissipating, and that is why the humanitarian work of the United Nations and its partners remains as vital as ever. Despite all the obstacles and dangers, they are nonetheless doing brave, successful, lifesaving work. And those brave and committed humanitarians have ensured the delivery of aid to as many in need as possible. In 2016, some 6.8 million people on average were reached with food assistance, some 18 million medical procedures were carried out or supported, 12 million treatment courses provided, 13 million people reached with water, sanitation and hygiene support, and 3.4 million children and pregnant or lactating women reached with essential nutrition services.

I must emphasize that the United Nations and its partners, who are mostly brave Syrian colleagues, will continue to stand with the people of Syria to deliver aid to millions of civilians, regardless of which side they are on or are perceived to be on, or if they are on no side at all. I welcome the release of the *2017 Humanitarian Response Plan* for Syria, which outlines requirements totalling some $3.4 billion for undertaking a comprehensive humanitarian response in Syria, including saving lives, enhancing protection and building people's resilience. I sincerely thank donors for their continuing support and respectfully ask them to go above and beyond this year so that we can

maintain our critical humanitarian support to civilians across the country.

Until there is any success in securing peace and silencing the guns fully and permanently, we must once again meet Syrians' immediate lifesaving needs as well as those in the recovery time beyond that, for as long as it takes, in what is now the seventh year of this hideous conflict. That is why the meeting to be held in Brussels on 5 April is so important, because it is this year's pledging event for the Syrian people and their surrounding neighbours. It will build on the successful strategic approach taken in London last year, but will be very mindful of the fact that, just like the humanitarians, the international community and donors are at full stretch.

In addition to all the points I have made this morning, I would like to finish by adding my voice to the two urgent appeals to all parties made by the Secretary-General earlier this month. First, we should make the most of the 30 December 2016 ceasefire established by the guarantors of the Astana meetings by enhancing it further with real protections for civilians and civilian infrastructure, and by removing the remaining obstacles and impediments in order to ensure that humanitarian aid keeps flowing to reach all those in need in Syria. Secondly, we should appeal to the parties, and all those with influence over them, to strive to overcome their differences and work together to put an end to the conflict. That is the only way to stop the suffering of Syrian men, women and children. I sincerely hope that this is the year that the parties to the conflict, and those who support their actions, regain their sense of humanity. As the Secretary-General has said, peace in Syria is a moral and political imperative for both the Syrian people and the world, and it is an imperative that cannot wait.

The President: I thank Mr. O'Brien for his briefing.

I now give the floor to those Council members who wish to make statements.

Mr. Skoog (Sweden): On behalf of the co-penholders Sweden, Egypt and Japan, I would first like to thank Under-Secretary-General O'Brien for his briefing and his resolute commitment to keeping humanitarian needs in Syria on the global agenda. I would also like to pay tribute to all the humanitarian workers on the ground.

Earlier this month, we passed the six-year mark of the war in Syria. Six years in which the lives and dignity of civilians have been assaulted on a daily basis; six years in which the Council has failed to deliver on its political and moral obligations to the Syrian people. The scale of the humanitarian disaster has reached a level that is difficult to appreciate fully. Syria's development has been bombed backwards by four decades. Seven million Syrians do not know where their next meal will come from. Today the number of refugees in the region has passed the 5 million mark.

Despite the fact that the United Nations-led talks are well into their fifth round, and despite the fact that the Astana ceasefire agreement has been in place for three months, there has been no sustained progress on humanitarian access. It is unacceptable that only one besieged area was reached during the month of February, according to the report we have just heard. This week, however, four inter-agency convoys were allowed to deliver their cargo, substantially increasing the number of recipients for March, at least in hard-to-reach areas. That shows us that it can be done. The Council must not let this week be a one-off. We must try to translate it into systematic and sustained increased access, especially to besieged areas. We look forward to discussing the more technical aspects of how to achieve this with other Council members in the consultations to be held today.

Mr. Rosselli (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): We should like once again to thank Under-Secretary-General Stephen O'Brien for his briefings. We wish also to express gratitude for his work and that of his team, as well as for the courage shown by the thousands of humanitarian workers on the ground, who are risking their lives every day, as has been demonstrated time and again. We pay tribute to all of them.

As the United Nations is an Organization of States, our primary calls are always aimed at States, and we therefore join in the call made recently by Stephen O'Brien on the authorities in Syria to do their utmost urgently to cooperate to ensure access by humanitarian workers to all areas to which the United Nations is prepared to deliver assistance. What is most tragic here is that the United Nations has the material and personnel necessary to provide such humanitarian assistance, but cannot access areas in need owing to what Mr. O'Brien described as being, in the best-case scenario, bureaucratic delays, and, in the worst, deliberate attempts to block such access. We are

therefore united behind the call made on the Syrian authorities by Stephen O'Brien.

The situation has not changed much since last month. As has been stressed, the Syrian war in now in its seventh year. This war has now lasted even longer than the Second World War and shows no sign of coming to an end. There has been some improvement owing to the ceasefire signed last year, which has given the population some respite. Yet the violence continues to escalate, terrorist activities continue in the context of an utterly inhumane level of violence, with the obvious consequent impact on the civilian population, which is the preferred target.

Da'esh and other extremist groups continue to have tremendous potential to cause devastation in the country. As Mr. O'Brien confirmed, an agreement was recently reached to evacuate civilians from various areas, including the so-called four towns, but we share his concern with regard to the conditions under which the evacuations are being carried out. They should be voluntary in nature and to locations chosen by the evacuees themselves, with the freedom to return to their places of origin when conditions permit.

We have also taken note of the fact that several agreements relating to such evacuations are being facilitated. These are agreements between parties, States and groups that had previously been sworn enemies fighting on the ground, but have nonetheless been able to reach agreement so as to enable evacuations to occur. This shows that with political will, it is possible to make progress. We hope that this type of agreement will not be limited to the humanitarian area but also extend to other areas so as to once and for all put an end to the violence and war in Syria.

Mr. Arancibia Fernández (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs General Stephen O'Brien for his briefing and express our full support for the work that has been entrusted to him. We also take this opportunity to acknowledge all of those who are endeavouring to alleviate the suffering of the civilian population of Syria.

Six years after the beginning of this serious conflict, we are dismayed at the situation that the people of Syria are continuing to face. According to reports issued by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, led by Under-Secretary-General O'Brien, today 3.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, caught up in a conflict that has resulted in the internal displacement of 6.3 million people. In the month of March alone, as Mr. O'Brien has noted, 84,000 people have been newly displaced.

We are deeply concerned to see that despite the ceasefire that is in effect in keeping with resolution 2336 (2016), of 31 December 2016, attacks by the parties to the conflict against civilians and infrastructure continue. We firmly believe that the agreements reached must be implemented and respected so that the civilian population can remain on the margins of the conflict.

We deplore the fact that, according to the press statement issued by the World Health Organization on 15 March, more than half of hospitals and primary-care facilities in Syria are either closed or only partially functioning and that their capacity has been even further reduced by indiscriminate attacks on medical infrastructure. We are concerned at the fact that despite the ceasefire and regional agreements, security-related problems in general, particularly in the context of sporadic disputes, have had an impact on the capacity to deliver humanitarian assistance to those in need.

We would also call attention to the worrisome fact that the security forces of the parties involved are continuing to remove certain first-aid items, including surgical and other equipment, from the medical supplies carried by humanitarian assistance convoys, thereby reducing their capacity and effectiveness to assist those persons who urgently require such aid.

We remind the parties to the conflict that they must provide absolute and unconditional access to humanitarian assistance in Syria. We urge them to abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law and to refrain from hampering the delivery of humanitarian assistance so that it can reach those in need, whether they be in easy-to-reach or hard-to-reach areas. There have also been reports of administrative problems in terms of the approval of monthly plans for humanitarian assistance, and we therefore call on all parties involved to ensure greater coordination and cooperation with the Government of Syria in order to prevent such problems from recurring.

We deplore the fact that in February, more than 400 innocent civilians, including women and children, lost their lives owing to cowardly attacks by Da'esh and to military operations carried out by the forces on the ground. We unequivocally believe that all actions to fight terrorism must be taken in a coordinated manner

with the Government so as to prevent the deaths of innocent civilians, in full respect of the provisions of resolution 2254 (2015) and 2336 (2016).

In this context, we acknowledge and commend the tremendous efforts being made by the Government of Syria to fight Da'esh, a combat that is being waged on behalf of us all. We strongly condemn all terrorist attacks as criminal and unjustifiable, regardless of their motivation and wherever, whenever and by whomsoever committed. We reaffirm the need for all States to combat terrorism by all means, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and other obligations under international law.

Lastly, we reiterate that the Plurinational State of Bolivia firmly and expressly believes that the only way to put an end to this sensitive conflict is through an orderly and inclusive Syrian-led political process. We therefore reiterate our support for the progress made at the Astana and Geneva meetings. We have high hopes that these dialogues will bear fruit.

The President: There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers. I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.40 a.m.